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## **PART-TIME AND SHORT CYCLE EDUCATION: NEEDS AND OPINIONS BASED ON AN INTERNATIONAL SURVEY**

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**Abstract:** *In relation to the project entitled ‘Part-time and Short Cycle Studies in Serbia’ this paper aims at overviewing and analyzing the results of an online questionnaire-based survey. The questionnaire was developed at the University of Szeged, Hungary. The respondents were representatives of a wide variety of international teaching staff and exchange students from abroad. The novelty of the paper is that the needs for PT and SC programs and the opinions concerning these forms of education reflect an international point of view. In summary the authors intend to formulate recommendations, which might be useful for institutions planning or implementing PT and SC study programs.*

**Key Words:** Part-Time Studies, Short Cycle Education, Dissemination, Methodology, Recommendations

### **1. INTRODUCTION**

An important characteristic feature of project-related dissemination and exploitation plans is that they always offer a wide range of flexible project activities in order to popularize project achievements. This feature is of crucial importance in the project entitled ‘*Part-time and Short Cycle Studies in Serbia*’ [3] as well, since part-time (PT) and short cycle (SC) programs are relatively new areas in higher education in general and in the Serbian system in particular. In addition, as it is detailed in a European Commission document entitled *Memorandum on Lifelong Learning* issued in 2010, in our times labor market-oriented and needs-centered education, as well as internationalization are in general of crucial importance both in Europe as well as in the individual European countries [4].

The novelty of educational forms is one of the reasons why dissemination and exploitation are of crucial importance in project work in the area of education. Plans for dissemination and

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<sup>3</sup><https://pt-sche.metropolitan.ac.rs/> [Accessed 14/02/2019]

<sup>4</sup> [http://arhiv.acs.si/dokumenti/Memorandum\\_on\\_Lifelong\\_Learning.pdf](http://arhiv.acs.si/dokumenti/Memorandum_on_Lifelong_Learning.pdf) [Accessed 14/02/2019]

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exploitation written at the beginning of a project life cycle need to be altered, upgraded, complemented and revised throughout project work. Several and varied dissemination activities need to be carried out during the different phases of a project [5], but these phases may also overlap. Some dissemination and exploitation activities even extend beyond the actual project phases. On the other hand it also needs to be added that although dissemination represents a continuum in any project's lifecycle, the first (initial) and last (final) phases of project work are always of extraordinary significance.

In conclusion it can be stated that dissemination and exploitation in general do not represent occasional project activities, but they need to be seen as a continuum in their complexity and when the achievements and outcomes of a project are evaluated, assessment needs to be done from an extremely broad perspective, including international implications.

## 2. THE QUESTIONNAIRE

Considering the formerly detailed points, the project entitled '*Part-time and Short Cycle Studies in Serbia*', dissemination activities initially focused on internal dissemination, i.e. networking and building optimally-functioning relationships within the consortium itself; liaising with external stakeholders in the partners' own countries was also targeted in the first phase. But, in the final phase of the project the popularization of the achievements and outcomes has come into the focus at international level, too, and as part of these activities in the last year of project work a questionnaire-based international survey was carried out.

The questionnaire was compiled by a team of instructors and internationalization experts from the University of Szeged, one of the partner institutions. The questionnaire itself comprised six main parts, all of which were intended to focus on areas either related to one aspect of part-time and short cycle studies or the aspect of dissemination in project work.

The six groups of questions in the questionnaire were as follows: I. Mapping the respondents' background, II. Identifying the descriptors of PT and SC studies within a particular learning environment (university), III. Possible target groups in PT and SC education, IV. Mapping specific needs of PT and SC learners, V. Effective teaching methods in PT and SC education, VI. Dissemination in project work, with a special emphasis on the PT&SCHE project.

The first part of the questionnaire aimed at describing the respondents' general background including age, gender, current occupation and educational background. This part of the questionnaire also aimed to find out about the respondents' past or current involvement in PT and SC studies. There were also questions related to the respondents' future plans concerning their possible enrollment in some PT and SC program.

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The second group of questions was aimed at mapping the respondents' opinion on the optimal learning environment in higher education studies, i.e. the role, interests and motivation of universities in the elaboration and running of PT and SC programs.

The third section of the questionnaire was written with the aim of finding out what role PT and SC programs need to play in the education and career paths of individual social groups, with a special emphasis on the education and training of certain groups of disadvantaged persons.

The fourth set of questions enquired about the needs and expectations of the individual target groups concerning the effectiveness of part-time and short cycle programs.

The questions in Section V were aimed at identifying the requirements of high-quality and marketable PT and SC programs from a pedagogical-methodological perspective.

The last section of the questionnaire had questions about dissemination in general and the effectiveness of certain dissemination tools related to PT and SC studies in particular.

### **3. ANALYSIS OF RESPONSES**

The survey was conducted in the fall semester of the academic year of 2018/19. The questionnaire was filled in and submitted by 55 persons. The majority of respondents included international teachers and students. The teachers were from foreign, mostly ERASMUS partner institutions, which are affiliated with the Faculty of Education of the University of Szeged. The students represented a group of ERASMUS incoming students of varied specializations who studied at the University of Szeged in the fall semester of 2018/19. There was a small group of respondents, too, (14 persons), who represented the University of Szeged more directly. They were either teachers or PT students of the Department of Modern Languages of the Faculty of Education, or, represented administrative members of staff of the same institution working directly with international teachers and students. It means that all Hungarian respondents were actively involved in internationalization and, supposedly, they had a broader than average experience in working with various programs, courses, visiting teachers and students at international level.

#### **3.1 Background Information**

27.3% of the 55 respondents were male and 72.7 % female. The respondents were aged between 19 and 68. 38.8% of the respondents were international students, 21.8% local staff members, 18.2% international staff members, and 12.7% local students.

Many respondents are from Hungary (25.5%), but we have received answers from Poland, Spain, Italy, the Russian Federation and Belgium, countries which have not been directly involved in the PT&SCHE project, so the questionnaire also served as an international-level project dissemination tool.

As concerns the qualification of the respondents, 43.6% have or will have a bachelor's degree, 23.6% hold a master's degree, and 32.7% a PhD. The respondents come from a wide variety of backgrounds, ranging from Applied Linguistics, Languages, Cultural Studies, through Social Studies, Sociology to Geography.

47.3 % of the respondents have been involved in some form of part-time study program; 20% in correspondence programs, 10.9 % in evening courses, 16.4% in distance learning programs, and 12.7% in supplementary programs.

43.6% have been involved in short-cycle programs, including full-time higher vocational training programs (16.4%), postgraduate specialist training programs based on their first or second degree (20%), and in-service training programs (18.2%).

41.8% of the respondents would be interested in doing a part-time and/or short-cycle studies in their own field, whereas 58.2% would be interested in acquiring completely different new skills or knowledge.

In summary, we can say that our respondents fairly represent an international higher education community.

### 3.2 Mapping the learning environment

The second part of the questionnaire aimed at mapping the learning environment.

First, participants were asked to rank on a scale of 1 to 4 the importance of areas universities should concentrate on in the current social and learning environment. Number 1 was very important, and number 4 was not important at all.

The eight areas were the following:

1. Initial training of students
2. Elaboration of new programs for former students
3. Part- time and short cycle programs
4. Programs in areas the institution is already specialized in
5. Development of novel areas
6. Theoretical knowledge
7. Introduction of advanced technologies
8. Practical training of own students

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Out of the eight areas listed, 50.9% of the respondents considered the practical training of own students as very important. In addition, the initial training of students was also ranked very important by 49.1% of the respondents.

These areas are followed by the areas respondents considered “important”. 54.5% considered part-time and short-cycle programs important, followed by the elaboration of new programs for former students (52.7%). Programs in the areas the institution is already specialized ranked next (47.3%), fourth was the introduction of new technologies (41.8%). Theoretical knowledge and the development of novel areas were considered as important or less important by the majority of the respondents.

Based on the overall results, the three most important areas are the initial training of students, practical training of own students, and programs in areas the institutions already specialized in. The least important areas are development of novel areas, part-time short-cycle programs, and theoretical knowledge.

### 3.3 Possible target groups

The next set of questions focused on possible target groups. The question was: Are part – time and short cycle programs important for the following groups of people?

The target groups were former university dropouts, mature / senior learners, mothers with babies or young children, international students, the unemployed, the university’s own staff, the disabled, the socially disadvantaged, members of ethnic minorities, and the local community.

The unemployed and the socially disadvantaged were ranked first, both with 94.5%, followed by the disabled (90.9%). Next, two groups were ranked; mothers with babies or young children and members of ethnic minorities, both receiving 87.3%. Mature (senior) learners and the local community followed, both with 85.5%. International students came in next, with 83.6%. The two groups for whom these programs were considered as the least important were the university’s own staff (78.2%) and former university dropouts (76%).

### 3.4. Identifying learners’ needs

Section IV of the questionnaire intended to identify learners’ needs, i.e. what their expectations would be concerning an effective and high-quality PT or SC program. The popularity and prestige of a given profession (program) was marked as very important by only 52.7% of all respondents, while 4.5% judged this feature as less important and 9.1% as not important at all. On the other hand the easiness and clarity of programs was evaluated as very important or important by a total of 72.7 % (29.1%+43.6%). Respondents had very diverse views concerning the importance of the uniqueness of a PT and SC program. While this feature was considered important by 49.1% of all respondents, 40% stated that this feature was less important. The transferability of a program and the consideration of PT and SC students’ individual needs were the features which were considered by a total of 72.8% and 76.4% as very important or important.

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In summary it can be stated that as far as learners' needs are concerned the transferability of programs and the consideration of students' needs were considered to be the most important features in PT and SC education.

### 3.5. Methodology: PT and SC Programs

The next group of questions concerned the methodology of teaching in PT and SC programs. These questions aimed to find out to what extent new and specific teaching methods or approaches are considered as desirable in PT and SC studies. Unexpectedly, respondents seemed to have diverse opinions when assessing the importance of face-to-face meetings and consultations as compared with online meetings and consultations. A total of 80% marked face-to-face meetings and consultations as very important or important, while only 62.7% thought that online meetings and consultations were very important or important for PT and SC students. In our respondents' view providing students with solid theoretical foundation was less important than the inclusion of practical aspects and modules in PT and SC programs. (65.5 % and 78.2%) As far as the mode of work is concerned most respondents thought that team work and project work should dominate in PT and SC studies. An interesting feature in this set of questions was that almost three quarters of respondents (74.6%) wrote that liaising with potential places of work represents special significance in PT and SC programs. The use of state-of-the-art technologies was considered very important or important by 70.9% of all respondents.

In summary it can be stated that, although PT and SC studies represent relatively new areas in higher education, and, as such, they are expected to use the most advanced technologies and the most up-to-date pedagogical methods, the majority in the group of international respondents expressed an opinion that face-to-face meetings and consultations with university teachers should be emphatically present in PT and SC education as well.

### 3.6. Dissemination

The last set of questions was directly linked to dissemination issues. The questions were designed to map the respondents' source of information when acquiring information on projects and project work. With this set of questions it became also possible to measure the effectiveness of the various dissemination tools. It was the ERASMUS+ Project Platform (43.6%), the institutional websites (49.1%), the social media (38.2%), existing personal contacts and professional networks (32.7%) and public events (30.9%) that were considered the most significant sources of information for the respondents, while, surprisingly, targeted written materials, including leaflets, brochures, postcards were thought to be less important.

From the answers to this group of questions it can be seen that institutional (university) websites are very important sources of information at international level, too. This is why these websites should serve the needs of international staff and students as well, by giving information in foreign languages (at least in English), too. Not surprisingly the importance of the social media is increasing in project-related dissemination work as well. In addition, the answers clearly pointed out that the personal factor, i.e. direct contacts with the members of other university communities, as well as professional networking also play a role of utmost significance in dissemination work.

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Eventually, the questionnaire invited respondents to write personal comments on the topic of PT and SC education. Only four respondents used this opportunity. In their remarks they pointed out the importance of interdisciplinary partnerships, the responsibility of universities in promoting PT and SC programs on their own websites, the inclusion of face-to-face meetings and consultations in PT and SC study programs. Also, one respondent mentioned that in addition to attending classes of regular bachelor and master level studies, ERASMUS students would also be interested in acquiring more information on PT and SC programs, and, in addition to their regular bachelor- or master-level programs they would be interested in enrolling some PT and SC courses or in liaising with representatives of the world of work of the host country.

#### 4. CONCLUSION

Considering the results of the international-level survey conducted by experts from the University of Szeged, Faculty of Education as part of the project '*Part-time and Short Cycle Studies in Serbia*', the following recommendations can be made for those institutions of higher education which intend to develop, introduce or run part-time and/or short cycle study programs.

4.1. It is advisable to build on already existing expertise in a field, in other words develop programs the institutions are already specialized in. In the process, initial training of students and the practical training of students should be focused on.

4.2. Possible target groups could be the unemployed, the socially disadvantaged and the disabled.

4.3. The strengthening of the practical, labor-market-oriented features of these studies is essential.

4.4. The transferability of PT and SC programs is a key issue, because it is the feature that enables learners to participate in supplementary programs, do further studies, upgrade their certificates or even do studies or internships abroad.

4.5. In the area of dissemination in addition to traditional tools including the regular and systematic use of project logo, project website and printed materials, institutional websites (both in the national languages of the countries of the consortia and in English), the social media, professional networking and personal contacts are of crucial importance. In dissemination work international partners and ERASMUS students need to be considered as a target group of special importance.

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## REFERENCE LITERATURE

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